TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

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Special Issue

The Battle Over the Israel Lobby

As Meersheimer and Walt's long awaited book "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" draw hysterical abuse, Kathy and Bill Christison define the lobby's real nature, trace its history, and measure its actual power.

By Kathleen and Bill Christison

One of the principal arguments of those on both the left and the right who dismiss the lobby as of only minimal importance is that the U.S.A. has been so consistently pro-Israeli through six decades, through both Republican and Democratic administrations, through periods when the lobby was weak and periods of great organized lobby strength, that it is impossible to posit the lobby as the principal driver behind, or a detrimental influence on, U.S. Middle East policy.

According to this argument, U.S. ties to and general affection for Israel represent more of a natural attraction than a matter, as one analysis puts it, of "mere promotion and advocacy". But the critical question that few analysts seem to address is how this affection arose in the first place: was it solely an automatic reflex, the appeal of a persecuted people in desperate need of a haven and thought to be so "like us" socially and culturally that it has always been deemed right and proper for us to bend our interests and our policy to theirs, spending billions of dollars and inestimable international political capital on them, or did the relationship and the very affection itself grow out of the efforts of a skillful and very influential lobby of powerful individuals and groups that existed for decades before the establishment of Israel?

A definitional misunderstanding enters in here. One of the major problems with the left critics' argument with Mearsheimer and Walt appears to be the critics' failure to understand what exactly "the lobby" constitutes. Mearsheimer and Walt define it as "the loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction". It is made up of American Jews and others who "make a significant effort in their daily lives to bend U.S. foreign policy so that it advances Israel's interests". One can further define the lobby as those influential elements in the U.S. – individuals as well as organizations, non-Jews as well as Jews – who have as a primary objective the advancement of Israeli interests.

The critical elements here in understanding the definition and clearly recognizing what constitutes the lobby are that it includes individuals as well as organizations who actively work to advance Israel's interests, as part of their daily lives and as one of their primary objectives. The lobby, in other words, is not merely AIPAC and not merely any one, or even all, of the other major Jewish American organizations, but it includes influential individuals, often U.S. policymakers themselves, for whom advancing Israel's interests is one of their major objectives. This is a key aspect of lobby power that a great many analysts fail to understand.

A recent analysis of the Mearsheimer-Walt lobby study co-authored by Mitchell Plitnick, of Jewish Voice for Peace, and Chris Toensing, editor of *Middle East Report*, evidenced this common misunderstanding of what the lobby comprises. Although giving the two scholars' 2006 study high marks on many counts, Plitnick and Toensing label as an "essential flaw" the Mearsheimer-Walt conclusion that U.S. Middle East policy would be "more temperate" if the lobby were not so influential. This conclusion, Plitnick and Toensing believe, is disproved by what they call "the remarkable continuities in U.S. Middle East policy since the Truman administration, including in times when the pro-Israel lobby was weak".

Throughout their article, Plitnick and Toensing assume that, from the beginning of Israel's existence in 1948, U.S. presidents and policymakers always felt a natural affinity for Israel, an automatic bond forged without benefit of any political encouragement and, as the Cold War evolved, were increasingly impelled toward a close relationship with Israel for strategic reasons, again, without benefit of any political encouragement. The general public, they say, also has a strong "positive disposition toward Israel" that, in turn, has an impact on policymakers' decisions. Plitnick and Toensing seem to assume that an organized lobby did not really exist until well after a U.S.-Israeli alliance of friendship and strategic ties had been cemented. As if the lobby was some kind of Johnny-come-lately to the alliance, they contend that the "major institutions of the Israel lobby arose during the Reagan years to defend the U.S.-Israeli strategic alliance forged in the wake of the 1967 war".

In other words, according to this assessment, love for Israel came first, for

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Franklin Roosevelt had his own small group of close Zionist advisers. His views were shaped and his policy defined under the scrutiny and influence of Zionist leaders such as Rabbi Stephen Wise and Judge Felix Frankfurter.

policymakers as well as for the general public, and only much later did an organized lobby emerge to formalize and sustain the ties of affection. Many others on the left who minimize the substance of Mearsheimer and Walt's message put forth the same argument that a close U.S.-Israeli relationship arose in the natural order of things and the lobby emerged only later as a mere adjunct to existing policy.

But the thesis that there have been "remarkable continuities in U.S. Middle East policy since the Truman administration" ignores a great deal of history. Although there have indeed been "continuities" in policy, these are not actually so "remarkable" if one recognizes that a very influential Zionist, and later Israeli, lobby has existed in one form or another since at least the days of Woodrow Wilson and the start of the Zionist push for a Jewish national home in Palestine and that this lobby had been at work influencing policy for 30 years before Truman recognized the new Israeli state in 1948. An organized lobby, in the form of several Jewish American organizations, has existed since the end of World War I, waxing and waning through the years but always able to influence policymaking and legislation at critical moments in Zionist/Israeli history. More importantly, in the early days before Israel's establishment, the major lobbyists very often consisted of influential individuals who were close to a series of U.S. presidents and were able to bend their ears and bend their policy toward support for the Zionist enterprise.

The Historical Background

Woodrow Wilson played a pivotal part in institutionalizing U.S.-Zionist ties. Although he was a student of the Bible and believed that a Jewish "return" to the Holy Land was in the natural order of things, he was not particularly interested in Zionism when first approached to endorse Britain's 1917 Balfour Declaration, which promised support for the establishment of a Jewish "national home" in Palestine. He did, however, formally endorse this document and several subsequent pro-Zionist congressional resolutions at the urging of his good friend and political ally Justice Louis Brandeis and other influential Zionist supporters.

Brandeis, whom Wilson appointed to the Supreme Court in 1916, was one of the founders of the Zionist Organization of America and at the time of his appointment to the Court was serving as its president. Knowing of Brandeis' close friendship with Wilson, Zionist leaders abroad, such as Chaim Weizmann, and prominent U.S. Jews like Rabbi Stephen Wise used Brandeis as a conduit to Wilson on matters relating to Palestine. Through this channel, Zionists frequently sought, and always received, Wilson's public and private reassurances of continuing U.S. support for Zionism. The occasional objections to the Zionist project from officials in Wilson's administration were ignored and their opinions bypassed. Through their interventions with Wilson, Brandeis and his colleagues essentially committed the United States to firm, and ultimately lasting, support for the Zionist project and made Wilson a strong Zionist.

In an era when world affairs and the fate of nations were very often determined by a handful of powerful men, the notion of one strong Zionist manipulating the thinking and the actions of a president was not particularly remarkable, and Brandeis managed to wield considerable influence over British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour as well and often served as liaison between Wilson and Balfour. Brandeis influenced Balfour's thinking on such weighty issues as self-determination for colonized peoples – a critical issue in Palestine at the time – and by the time the British Mandate over Palestine was confirmed in 1922, allied support for Zionism was cast in concrete, a harbinger of relationships to come, and a harbinger too of the influence that other powerful Zionist individuals would enjoy with many future presidents and world leaders.

A large nascent organized lobby also exerted considerable influence in these early years. Brandeis' Zionist Organization of America grew tenfold during World War I, to a remarkable 200,000. Although membership dropped in later years, lobbyists worked closely with Congress in 1922 to pass a joint resolution supporting the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine and were strong enough to make it evident to legislators in many key districts that support for Zionism was a critical election issue. In 1929, when Palestinian rioters launched anti-Zionist protests, Zionist activists were strong and numerous enough to be able to mobilize several demonstrations of up to 20,000 in New York City. Zionist activists also played a role in shaping media coverage of the situation in Palestine. Throughout the 1920s, the *New York Times* devoted an average of one or two articles a week to the issue, and more during crisis periods – a remarkable total given the relative unimportance of the Palestine issue to the U.S.A. in these years. The *Times* relied for much of its Palestine coverage on material from Zionist press agents and on the Jewish Telegraphic Agency wire service.

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EDITORS
ALEXANDER COCKBURN
JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

ASSISTANT EDITOR
ALEVTINA REA

BUSINESS
BECKY GRANT
DEVA WHEELER

DESIGN
TIFFANY WARDLE

COUNSELOR
BEN SONNENBERG

CounterPunch
PO Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558
1-800-840-3683
counterpunch@counterpunch.org
www.counterpunch.org
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A study of these early years thus shows clearly that, far from being weak or even non-existent, the pro-Zionist lobby was quite powerful from its inception. Zionist activists, from Louis Brandeis working in the halls of government, to the lobbyists pressuring Congress, to the grassroots organizers who brought supporters out onto the streets, were the prime movers both in formulating the view the general public gained of the Palestine issue and in shaping the official policy that emerged.

Franklin Roosevelt had his own small group of close Zionist advisers. His views were shaped and his policy defined under the scrutiny and influence of Zionist leaders such as Rabbi Stephen Wise and Judge Felix Frankfurter, who had ready access to the White House. Wise, a protégé of Louis Brandeis who took over the leadership of the Zionist Organization of America in the mid-1930s, was a longtime Democratic political colleague of Roosevelt. Frankfurter, another Brandeis' protégé whom Roosevelt appointed to the Supreme Court, and Wise used their easy access to Roosevelt to bring Zionist issues to his attention and urge his intercession on behalf of the Zionist cause, even during the height of World War II when Roosevelt avoided public comment on Zionism for fear of arousing anti-allied protest among the Arabs. Just a few months before his death, even immediately after promising Saudi King Abdul Aziz in 1945 that he would "do nothing to assist the Jews against the Arabs", Roosevelt authorized Wise to issue a rare public statement in his name, supporting unlimited Jewish immigration to Palestine and establishment of a Jewish state.

Political colleagues in Congress and elsewhere in Democratic politics, themselves influenced by Zionist activists, also had an impact on Roosevelt's thinking. Again, as in earlier years, a strong, well-organized lobby was active with Congress and at the grassroots level. In 1941, Zionist activists organized a group of prominent non-Jews who were pro-Zionist, to keep the issue of Palestine as a Jewish homeland alive and before the public. The group initially recruited 68 senators, 200 representatives, several governors, and two cabinet secretaries as members and within a year had a membership of 800 "distinguished citizens".

In 1943, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, an aggressive Zionist leader, organized a broad grassroots campaign to win congressional and popular support for the Zionist cause. Under the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC), he organized local chapters in virtually every community in the country with a Jewish population and in the hometown of every influential member of Congress. Working with local non-Jewish communities, AZEC also organized public rallies supporting Jewish statehood and generated pro-Zionist resolutions and telegrams to Congress from 3,000 organizations, including labor unions, Rotary clubs, and church groups.

By the early 1940s, the assumption that Palestine should be a Jewish national home was pervasive in U.S. political circles. Although congressional support for Zionism never reached the near-unanimous levels of today, the Zionist lobby was quite successful even in these early days in garnering wide support in Congress. The easy recruitment of two-thirds of the Senate and half the House to a non-Jewish Zionist organization in 1941 is one indication of considerable lobby strength. A year later, a similar number of congressmen signed on to a resolution pushed by the lobby, noting the urgent need to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. In the presidential election year of 1944, both party platforms called in nearly identical language for establishment of "a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth" and urged the British to open Palestine to unrestricted Jewish immigration.

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By the time Harry Truman came to office after Roosevelt's death, U.S. support for the formation of a Jewish homeland in all or part of Palestine was so much a given that it had become an integral part of policy. Despite the near reverence he has enjoyed in many pro-Israel circles for 60 years because of his recognition of the new Israeli state in 1948, Truman was ambivalent for various reasons until late in the game about the wisdom of establishing a Jewish state. On the surface, in fact, the deck appeared to be stacked against Truman supporting Zionism to the end. He was skeptical of the appropriateness of establishing any state on racial or religious lines; every agency and official in the government, save his own White House advisers, opposed establishing a Jewish state for strategic reasons; partition of Palestine to give the Jews a state was thought to risk giving the Soviets entrée to the Middle East, or to endanger Western access to Arab oil, or both; and finally, Truman was angered by the importuning of Zionist spokesmen and refused to allow visits after Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver actually shouted at Truman and pounded on his desk.

But despite all this, the pressures on Truman toward support for a Jewish state were so heavy as to be irresistible. His three closest White House aides, all strong Zionists, had a profound impact on Truman's thinking and his decision making, doing more than anyone else to shape his viewpoint on Palestine. The three were Clark Clifford, a non-Jewish Missouri lawyer who was a key domestic adviser; David Niles, a Roosevelt administration's holdover who served as Truman's adviser on minority affairs; and Max Lowenthal, a longtime political ally of Truman who served as Clifford's legal adviser on the Palestine issue. Clifford was a vocal Zionist, possibly influenced by Niles and Lowenthal, and both of these Jewish men were so emotional about the Zionist cause that Truman once said he found it disconcerting that they burst into tears whenever he tried to talk to them about the issue.

All three of these men had constant easy access to Truman, particularly during the height of the partition debate over Palestine in 1947 and 1948, and including during those periods when Truman banned all other Zionist spokesmen from the White House, and they fed Truman a steady diet of material designed to influence his own emotions and his personal perceptions of the issue. Both Niles and Lowenthal worked closely with Zionist organizations, serving as principal entrées to the White House for Zionist activists and not infrequently passing information on White House and administration thinking to the Zionist groups. Niles was a member of several so-called

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"brain trusts" established to advise Truman, one of which set out specifically to neutralize State Department opposition to the Zionist project by enlisting prominent individuals as advocates for Zionism and, more bluntly, by impressing on congressional leaders of both parties the electoral danger of not supporting the partition of Palestine.

Although Truman was always basically Zionist-oriented in his thinking and never entertained Arab concerns at all, pure politics and an acute awareness of the importance of the Jewish vote clearly played a large part in his thinking on the Palestine issue. A *Time* magazine article from October 1946, recently unearthed by lobby-watcher Jeff Blankfort, indicated that thoughts of accommodating the Jewish vote in New York were uppermost in Truman's mind in advance of the 1946 off-year election – a time when his own popularity ratings had dropped to around 40 per cent. A Zionist organization ran an ad in the *New York Times* harshly criticizing the Democrats for allegedly failing to fulfill their commitment to support "the aspirations of the Jewish people" in Palestine. Noting that Truman "knew as well as any Republican that the Democrats did not have a prayer to win in New York State unless they could pile up a huge majority in heavily Jewish New York City", *Time* reported that David Niles sprang into action after the ad appeared and pushed Truman to "do something at once for the Jews". And he did. Although his action brought heavy criticism from Britain and obviously angered the Arabs, Truman released a letter on Yom Kippur eve demanding that Britain allow 100,000 Jews, then in Displaced Person camps in Europe, into Palestine – a move that would give Jews a considerable demographic boost in Palestine.

The organized lobby was highly active in this period, as is evident from the *Time* article. Although AIPAC was not formed until 1951, multiple Zionist organizations made a massive effort to garner support for Jewish statehood between 1945 and 1948 and unquestionably played a critical and decisive part in creating a body of opinion throughout the United States – among the public, in the press, in Congress, and at the White House – that assumed the rightness of the Zionist program in Palestine and ignored any contrary reasoning, whether from Arabs or from serious analysts concerned about the geostrategic implications of planting a largely European settler colonialist project in the heart of an Arab region. Despite the lobby's considerable success at earlier periods, historians of this era have observed that it performed a critical function by successfully "set[ting] a tone for public discussion" during the Truman presidency.

This is the critical point: the setting of a tone for public discussion. In those few years between the end of the war and the establishment of Israel, the Zionist story of Jews rising above the horrors of the Holocaust was so compelling and was portrayed as so romantic that its success was all but inevitable. Abba Eban once wrote that Zionism was destined to be embraced by anyone with "a historic imagination and at least a modest ounce of romantic eccentricity". Americans were eager to demonstrate that they could be romantic eccentrics in a good cause, but without the lobby to direct their energies the moment would clearly not have lasted. Rabbi Silver's AZEC mobilized national and local politicians – down to mayors and town council members, along with newspaper editors, radio broadcasters, business leaders, labor leaders, and movie stars – to the Zionist cause. The word went out that every American "with a sense of fair play" should "side with justice" and support partition by writing to Truman. The result was a barrage of 135,000 telegrams, postcards, and letters to the White House during the second half of 1947, when partition was being debated at the U.N.

The lobby took off in the 1950s, its growth and molding taking place largely under the aegis of Abba Eban, Israel's first ambassador to the U.S.A.

The pressure extended to the political arena: in 1945, at the instigation of Zionist activists, 33 state legislatures, representing fully 85 per cent of the U.S. population, passed resolutions favoring a Jewish state in Palestine, and 37 governors signed a pro-Zionist cable to Truman.

The Lobby's Many Manifestations

The lobby took off in the 1950s, its growth and molding taking place largely under the aegis of Abba Eban, Israel's first ambassador to the U.S.A. He believed, as he stated in a memoir, that the key to Israel's strength lay with U.S. public opinion, and he saw his principal task as making Israel "so acceptable to the American public" that if a disagreement ever arose between the two countries, any administration would be reluctant to carry the issue to the point of confrontation.

AIPAC, then newly established, and the several popular Jewish American organizations formed the core of Eban's public relations efforts. The Jewish leadership served as his ambassadors to the U.S. public, and Eban himself, engaged for years in a constant round of lectures to bring Israel's message to a broad audience. This network gave Eban and all future Israeli ambassadors a clear advantage in their dealings with succeeding U.S. administrations. The fact that an Israeli ambassador was known to have substantial backing behind him, when he appeared at the White House or the State Department, gave heft to Israel's representations and, as Eban himself wrote, "elevated the level at which American-Israeli affairs were transacted".

With the organized lobby entrenched as a fixture in U.S. politics and policymaking, the importance of individuals in a position to influence presidential decisions diminished. Nonetheless, many later presidents had their own pro-Israel friends and advisers who in their individual capacity served as lobbyists in every sense of the word. Lyndon Johnson had an entire coterie of powerful advocates fo Israel among his closest friends.

Bill Clinton's principal policymakers on Palestinian-Israeli issues – Dennis Ross, Martin Indyk, and Aaron David Miller – were all so close to Israel that Miller once acknowledged that he did not know where the line lay between his professional and his personal involvement in the issue. In Bush Jr.'s administration, the phenomenon of individuals who have long been active promoters of Israeli interests serving as policymakers in the administration has grown by several orders of magnitude. Elliott Abrams, Bush's senior Middle East adviser, and David Wurmser, Cheney's Middle East adviser, both still serving after many other neocons have left office, are long-

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Right now, today, perhaps the single most important result of the Israel lobby's activities in the U.S. arises from its policy of deliberately seeking to kill off public debate on the influence of the lobby itself.

time advocates who advance Israel's interests as their primary function in the U.S. government.

With the impressive array of individual lobbyists who have worked in some administrations, Israel has hardly needed an AIPAC. But AIPAC does carry out a vital role in keeping Congress in line, maintaining grassroots support for Israel, and coordinating the activities of the massive numbers of Jewish American and Christian fundamentalist supporters of Israel. The lobby, in all its manifestations, is unquestionably a vital entity in determining U.S. policy and in setting the U.S. on a course that serves the interests of Israel's leadership but often does harm to true U.S. interests.

Those like Plitnick and Toensing who maintain that affection is the primary driver of the U.S. relationship with Israel cannot be entirely gainsaid. Nor can those, also on the left, who say that, as a policy driver, the lobby has only minimal significance opposite the huge military-industrial complex. Obviously, affection and a sense of U.S. affinity for Israel and its culture and society play a large part in sustaining the unique closeness of the relationship. Obviously also the interests of the oil industry, and of arms manufacturers, and of global corporations have a large impact on the formulation of policy. But in the face of the historical record, it is surely impossible to sustain the notion that the intense lobbying just described, on behalf first of Zionism and later of Israel, over nearly a century, was secondary to or was transcended by the interests of arms manufacturers or the oil industry, and that the lobby is simply incidental to policies determined by the military-industrial complex.

The arms industry did not talk Woodrow Wilson into ignoring the objections of some of his policymakers who believed that accommodating Zionist goals ran against U.S. interests. The lobby did. The oil industry did not talk Harry Truman into supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine over the objections of every agency and department in his administration, which all saw the creation of a Jewish state at the expense of an entire native Arab population as dangerously inimical to U.S. interests. The lobby essentially made Truman's decision for him. (In fact, the oil industry generally did not favor Israel's creation for fear of the anger and the possible disruption of oil supplies that this would lead to in the Arab world. The oil industry, ever invested in geopolitical stability, also did not welcome Israel's victory in 1967 and its defeat of Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser, as many on the left contend.)

Neither, demonstrably, has the military-industrial complex played any role in determining the course of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, its oppression of nearly four million Palestinians living there, and the total U.S. acquiescence in and enablement of virtually every Israeli act of oppression. The United States' unquestioning support for the occupation is engineered and brought about by the lobby and is without doubt the U.S. policy that is most damaging to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

This issue of U.S. interests is at the heart of arguments over the power of the lobby. Anyone who supports a particular policy in Washington will always seek to demonstrate that what he wants is "in the national interest", and anyone opposed will argue the contrary. Whenever a supporter of the Israel lobby suggests that the lobby only advocates policies that advance the "true interests" of both the U.S. and Israel, or that the interests of both countries are identical, this statement is nothing but an opinion. The opposite is also true. When the authors of this article, or perhaps Mearsheimer and Walt, argue that a particular policy advocated by the Israel lobby does not reflect "true U.S. interests", that position is also an opinion that no one can convert into a fact by pointing to an official U.S. government document that defines approved national interests.

In practice, every year the executive or other branch of the U.S. government, assisted or steered by the dominant lobbies and special interests in the country, has a fairly free hand in manipulating what become the nation's interests and national policies for that particular year or session of Congress. The national interests themselves will not, at least publicly, be written down at all. The policies allegedly implementing them will be debated, but often only in the context of "how much" or "how little". All sides that participate in this game may agree, for instance, that one national interest of the U.S. is possession of a strong military force, and the arguments are only over how strong. In the main, the only democratic input comes from the Congress's fairly limited powers to accept, reject, modify in minimal ways and/or delay detailed acts of legislation that have already been worked out by the dominant lobbies, special interest groups, senior White House and executive branch staffers, and a few senior congressional committee chairmen and staff people. In the following year or session of Congress, the procedure repeats itself.

In this system, lobbies and lobbyists play a major role in decision making on all types of national interests and policies. On anything to do with Israel and the Middle East, the role of the Israel

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lobby is even more important, because of the pervasive ties this lobby has not only with the White House and the executive branch, but also with practically the entire membership of Congress.

Of course other lobbies in Washington also have power, although none has more than – and probably none has quite as much as – the Israel lobby. And, of course, since the activities of all lobbies and special interests reduce the amount of justice and democracy exercised in U.S. government actions, U.S. voters should exert greater efforts than they have to date toward reducing the power of lobbies. But there is another more immediate disadvantage to the great power of the Israel lobby over both the Republican and the Democratic parties. Right now, perhaps the single most important result of the Israel lobby's activities in the U.S. arises from its policy of deliberately seeking to kill off public debate on the influence of the lobby itself. Supporters of the lobby throw up the charge of anti-Semitism quite freely against those who criticize the lobby's power, with the clear intention of restraining others who might also wish to criticize the lobby but are less bold.

A more important result of this tactic is that it also causes many people to refrain from joining in a debate on broader questions – such as what should be the real national interests of the U.S. in the Middle East, and how may U.S. policies in this area be changed to better accord with these national interests. It is a consequence of no small import that today practically no element of the mainstream U.S. media is generating real discussion of how the U.S. may find beneficial results in changing many of its foreign policies, and that the Israel lobby is clearly contributing to preventing this discussion.

The cost of buying Israel's friendship rises with each election cycle, thanks to the lobby, and with each administration the distinction between Israel's policies and our own diminishes.

There has never in U.S. history been a relationship as close as that with Israel and, largely because of the lobby, the intimacy has grown cumulatively as the years have gone on. No presidential candidate, no politician at any level will be seen to be less pro-Israeli, less closely linked with Israel than his opponent. The cost of buying Israel's friendship rises with each election cycle, thanks to the lobby, and with each administration the distinction between Israel's policies and our own diminishes. Only an effort to shine a harsh light on the power of the Israel lobby will ever change these realities.

Kathleen Christison is a former CIA political analyst and has worked on Middle East issues for over 30 years. She is the author of *Perceptions of Palestine* and *The Wound of Dispossession*.

Bill Christison was a senior official of the CIA. He served as a National Intelligence officer and as director of the CIA's Office of Regional and Political Analysis.

They can be reached at kathy.bill.christison@comcast.net.

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